

Navigating Contradictions: Communication Challenges in Interracial Relationships
Through the Lens of Relational Dialectics Theory

Danny Hermsillo

COMS 5323

Navigating Contradictions: Communication Challenges in Interracial Relationships Through the Lens of Relational Dialectics Theory

Introduction

If we were to judge the state of interracial families in the U.S based upon what we see on TV and films, you would likely be under the impression that mixed couples dominate our society, and happily go about fixing homes, traveling and parenting children who may not look them. In reality, mixed-race families only make up about 19% of the population, according to the U.S. Census (Rico, 2024). Even marketing experts admit that they play a bigger role in media and advertising than they do in reality. “We noticed that interracial couples were frequently appearing in U.S. advertising — to the point that they were possibly being over-represented in advertising relative to their prevalence in the actual U.S. population,” said Rosanna K. Smith with the Gies College of Business. A study co-authored by the University of Illinois professor found that the presence of mixed families in advertising had mixed results. “Interracial couples increased brand evaluations and the desire to purchase from the brand relative to white couples, but interracial couples decreased brand outcomes relative to minority couples,” (Gies, 2024, para.3). So why include so many mixed-race families? The study found that advertisers see the couple's “warmth” as a selling point. That also seems to be an inaccurate reflection of the experiences multiracial couples endure in real life. Interracial couples face unique challenges rooted in social prejudice, cultural clashes, and identity negotiations. Mixed couples not only have to navigate the interpersonal tensions all couples face, but also the cultural currents that shape their lives together. **Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT)** provides a useful lens for understanding their struggles, since it states that relationships are sustained by negotiating competing needs, instead of trying to

eliminate contradictions (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). The literature included in this review shows that the struggles faced by interracial couples can be isolating at times. But they help the partners become more resilient, adaptable, and unified. In other words, an accurate reflection of their life experience.

Literature Review

Historical Context of Stigma in Interracial Relationships

Throughout the history of the United States, Interracial relationships have been faced with social stigmas, and were often forbidden, usually by European settlers who wanted to maintain racial purity (Kerney, 2021). In the early days of American colonization, mixed-couples were mostly made up of white settlers and Native Americans. As the country grew, relationships among plantation owners and slaves became more prevalent, as did their offspring. To this day, that sense of forbidden love lingers among mixed race couples. Killian interviewed Black–White couples to show how race and identity historical narratives still echo in their relationships (2001). These interviews showed that when faced with contradictions between openness and closeness, Black partners admitted to keeping quiet about their own racial fears to protect White partners. Many said they would rather hold their thoughts and feelings inside to protect the relationship, even if it meant not being fully open. The findings also showed that despite efforts to integrate their cultural traditions to feel like one unit, partners frequently separated themselves from their own heritage for the sake of a unified relationship. In essence, interracial couples constantly juggle between honest sharing and holding back. These findings align with RDT's assertion that relationships are continually caught in the tension between dominant social discourses and private relational meaning.

Vasquez et al. (2019) found that besides facing individual racism issues, mixed-race couples are judged as less valuable by society than single-race couples. This judgment can come from disapproval by their own families, which makes their relationships harder. Partners find themselves in a push-and-pull situation, trying to integrate into their families and communities, yet distancing themselves to protect their relationship. From an RDT perspective, such stigma underscores how external discourses continually intrude into intimate dialogue. These couples struggle to stay close to loved ones while preserving their own relationship. Growing Societal Acceptance and Persistent Prejudice

At the dawn of our nation's founding, interracial marriages were largely met with open hostility and were often kept secret lest the partners risk scandal, ridicule, violence or even death. While open hostility toward interracial couples has declined, prejudice persists. However, it tends to be more subtle and systemic than before. Steinbugler's (2014) ethnographic study found that interracial couples often felt conspicuous in segregated spaces, whether they be predominantly White or Black. The study showed that partners were often split on what they considered racism, creating tensions of openness/closedness and integration/separation. White partners often minimized racism. Black partners saw it as pervasive. This conflict often required ongoing negotiation through dialogue.

Another survey of 413 interracial couples revealed optimism: more than half believed societal conditions had improved over the past five years (Schelle, 2025). Yet couples remained highly aware of their inter-racial status, particularly in light of racialized cultural events such as the Black Lives Matter protests. From an RDT lens, these couples managed stability and change by adapting coping strategies while maintaining continuity, and openness and closedness in deciding how much to share about their experiences publicly. Some respondents expressed that they had to choose between being public or private about their struggles. They try to keep their relationship steady while adapting to pressures, and they carefully decide when to speak up about challenges and when to stay quiet.

Unique Communication and Identity Challenges

Interracial couples face communication issues common to all couples but intensified by racialized contexts. Pittman et al. (2024) found that Black–White couples reported higher stress, discrimination, and depressive symptoms than mono-racial couples, shaped by contradictory discourses between intimacy and societal marginalization. Through RDT, these dynamics reflect tensions of integration–separation and stability–change, as couples must continually renegotiate boundaries and coping strategies. The study used a national sample of young adults in romantic relationships from AddHealth. It looked at whether individuals in interracial couples are more likely to perceive stress and discrimination than single-race couples, if they experienced increased depressive symptoms and poorer self-rated health, and to what degree they thought the poor self-rated health characteristics were a result of perceived stress and discrimination (Pittman, et al., 2024). Beyond typical relationship issues, the study found that such stress can affect physical health and mental well-being. “Future research should further assess additional stressors to understand if interracial couples experience worse health outcomes due to being in a stigmatized relationship,” the study concluded (Pittman et al., 2024, p. 303).

Leslie and Young (2015) similarly identified recurring dialectics in therapy with interracial couples: integration–separation in balancing boundaries with unsupportive networks, expression–privacy in negotiating whether to discuss race within the relationship, and stability–change in adapting shared practices amid unique pressures. In other words, mixed-race couples must choose how much they want to stay connected with friends or family who don't support their relationship. They must also figure out if they are willing to talk openly among themselves about racial issues, or keep quiet about it to keep the peace. They are constantly juggling how to keep some routines and traditions steady (such as holidays with the family) while making adjustments for the challenges they face as an interracial couple. Therapists noted the need to create space for dialogue, reinforcing RDT's emphasis on

communication as the site of meaning-making.

A study of interracial parents extends these insights, showing how raising mixed-race children amplifies dialectical tensions (Lengyell & Weststrate, 2025). Parents balanced openness and closedness in deciding how much to discuss racism, integration and separation in negotiating cultural traditions, and connection and autonomy in handling public scrutiny of their children. These tensions illustrate how family identity is co-constructed at the intersection of personal and societal discourses. Couples wrestled with how much to talk openly about race and racism, both with each other and with their children. Parents sometimes withhold their own painful racialized experiences to shield children or partners, reflecting a tension between protecting and disclosing. “Our study suggests that the journey of parenting mixed-race children transcends mere tasks; it embodies a dynamic process of mutual growth and shared understanding,” (Lengyell & Weststrate, 2025, p. 1478).

Relational Resilience Amid Contradictions

Across these studies, one consistent theme is resilience. Despite enduring prejudice, couples actively create relational identities that resist marginalization. Seshadri and Knudson-Martin (2013) examined how interracial and intercultural couples organized their relationships and responded to societal, familial, and cultural challenges. Their results showed that interracial couples employed strategies like “creating a we,” reframing differences as strengths, and positioning themselves against societal disapproval. Such strategies align with RDT’s claim that contradictions are not resolved but transformed through dialogue into opportunities for connection and growth. “The lessons from this study suggest that many couples find their lives enhanced by their differences demonstrate relational strategies that enrich their lives,” (Seshadri & Knudson-Martin, 2013, p. 56).

Religious and spiritual practices function as important resources for communication and understanding. Vasquez et al. (2019) found that couples' shared spirituality functioned as a source of affirming dialogue, helping them withstand external stigma while sustaining satisfaction in their marriage. Silence may protect the relationship from conflict but risks invalidating one partner's experiences, while open dialogue validates experience but may intensify the racial tension within the marriage. These practices highlight RDT's insight that partners draw upon cultural discourses both to resist marginalization and to reaffirm unity.

Theoretical Framework

Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT) provides a valuable framework for examining how interracial couples navigate communication, as they contend with both common relational challenges and distinctive tensions rooted in race, culture, and societal prejudice. Developed by Baxter and Montgomery (1996), RDT asserts that relationships are constituted through dialogue and ongoing negotiation of contradictions rather than resolution of difference. This perspective is especially suited to interracial relationships, which are embedded with the challenges of race, history, and cultural identity. At its core, the theory asserts that relational life is organized around the interplay of opposing forces—such as autonomy and connection, openness and closedness, and stability and change—that cannot be permanently resolved but must be continually negotiated through communication. Partners jointly construct understandings of self, other, and relationship while engaging broader cultural dialogue that prescribe what intimacy “should” be (Baxter, 2011). Applied to interracial relationships, RDT spotlights how partners manage tensions arising from both interpersonal difference and societal discourse. For interracial couples, those issues often include racial hierarchy, cultural assimilation, and “colorblindness”. The colorblind argument (“love is love; race doesn’t matter”) often conflicts with discourses that emphasize racial awareness and affirm the significance of lived experiences with

prejudice and cultural identity. Through RDT's emphasis on dialogue, these interactions can be understood as moments of *discursive transformation*—where marginalized couples not only cope with but also reshape the cultural narratives that define love, race, and belonging.

Ultimately, RDT frames interracial relationships as communicative systems embedded in, yet resistant to, dominant discourses of race and intimacy. The tensions interracial couples encounter—between belonging and marginalization, openness and restraint, similarity and difference—serve not as obstacles to overcome but as opportunities for creating meaning and fostering resilience.

Contradictions at the Intersections of Race and Intimacy

Interracial couples experience persistent tensions between openness and closedness, connection and autonomy, and integration and separation. Brooks and Morrison (2022) demonstrate how external stigma and internal racial-ethnic worldviews create dialectical struggles in interracial partnerships. Couples with multi-culturalism perspectives—who openly acknowledge systemic racism—report higher relational satisfaction, suggesting that dialogue, rather than silence, enables healthier negotiation of competing discourses.

Other studies highlight how couples manage these contradictions in practice. Seshadri and Knudson-Martin (2013) found that interracial and intercultural couples develop relational structures—such as integrated or coexisting—that reflect varied strategies of negotiating cultural tensions, while Killian (2001) showed how couples balance disclosure of racialized experiences with silence to protect harmony. Steinbugler (2014) and Pittman et al. (2024) extend this lens to societal contexts, illustrating how everyday racism and discrimination complicate couples' negotiations of unity and difference, stability and change. Despite such challenges, Schelle (2025) found many couples remain optimistic, reframing difference as strength and cultivating resilience through supportive communities.

Finally, family and parenting contexts amplify these tensions. Leslie and Young (2015) show that interracial couples in therapy often negotiate privacy versus openness regarding racial discourse and integration versus separation from unsupportive families. Lengyell and Weststrate (2025) further demonstrate how raising mixed-race children intensifies contradictions, such as blending versus preserving cultural traditions.

Taken together, this body of work illustrates RDT's value as a framework for understanding interracial relationships: rather than viewing contradiction as a problem to be solved, RDT positions it as the foundation of relational life. This perspective reveals interracial couples as active meaning-makers who transform tension into resilience and relational growth. Unlike models that focus narrowly on stress and adaptation, RDT frames interracial intimacy as an ongoing communicative process in which partners co-create meaning while navigating competing personal and cultural discourses. This makes RDT not only an explanatory lens but also a persuasive framework for rethinking interracial relationships as sites of resilience, creativity, and relational growth.

Conclusion

The literature demonstrates that interracial couples confront communication issues that are universal to romantic partnerships but uniquely intensified by racism, cultural difference, and societal discourses. From the lens of Relational Dialectics Theory, these challenges are not problems to be "solved" but ongoing contradictions that couples continually renegotiate through dialogue. Historical stigma, persistent prejudice, and evolving cultural contexts ensure that these tensions remain ever-present. Yet in managing them, interracial couples also co-create resilient partnerships, develop innovative family identities, and resist dominant cultural narratives that would marginalize their unions. In this way,

interracial relationships exemplify RDT's central premise: relational life is constituted by the dynamic negotiation of contradictions, where resilience emerges not in the absence of tension but through the ongoing practice of dialogue.

As for the opening observation of the abundance of inter-racial couples on TV and film, what would be a more accurate representation of their experience? Historically, the 1967 film *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* stands apart for being one of the first cinematic portrayals of an interracial relationship. It's hard to believe that 1967 was also the year when the U.S. Supreme Court overturned all state laws prohibiting mixed race marriages in the case of *Loving v. Virginia* (Loving, 1967). "My generation was bitterly divided over something that should have been so clear and right... the older generation's fears and prejudices have given way, and today's young people realize that if someone loves someone they have a right to marry," said Mildred Loving, a party in the case (American Constitutional Society, 2019, para. 2). Yet, nearly 60 years later mixed-race couples are still dealing with prejudice, stigma, and ostracization. And the prejudice is not limited to the color of a person's skin. Partners in same-sex couples have long been treated as outcasts. Same sex marriage was only legalized in 2015. And in the current political climate, it is in danger of being overturned. Despite what the laws or neighbors say, people from different cultures and backgrounds will continue to fall in love, and will continue to defy what society says is a proper relationship.

REFERENCES

- American Constitution Society. (2019, March 29). *Private: Mildred Loving endorses marriage equality for same-sex couples: ACS*. <https://www.acslaw.org/expertforum/mildred-loving-endorses-marriage-equality-for-same-sex-couples/>
- Baxter, L. A., & Montgomery, B. M. (1996). *Relating: Dialogues and dialectics*. Guilford Press.
- Gies College of Business (2024). *Ads featuring interracial couples produce mixed results for brands*. . <https://giesbusiness.illinois.edu/news/2024/09/30/ads-featuring-interracial-couples-produce-mixed-results-for-brands>
- Kerney, Alison, "Interracial Relationships: The History, Growth, and Effects on Individuals and Society" (2021). Integrated Studies. 323. <https://digitalcommons.murraystate.edu/bis437/323>
- Killian, K. D. (2001). Reconstituting racial histories and identities: The narratives of interracial couples. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 27(1), 27–42. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1752-0606.2001.tb01137.x>
- Lengyell, M., & Weststrate, N. M. (2025). Growing together, knowing together: Dynamics of interracial parenting of mixed-race children. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 87(4), 1454–1481. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.13084>
- Leslie, L. A., & Young, M. (2015). Interracial couples in therapy: Managing relational dialectics. *Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy*, 14(2), 95–115. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15332691.2014.953651>
- Loving v. Virginia | 388 U.S. 1 (1967) | Justia U.S. Supreme Court Center. (n.d.-c). <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/388/1/>

- Pittman, Z. R., Mullet, N., Hawkins, L. G., Guzman, A., & Garcia, M. S. (2024). Modern challenges of individuals in interracial relationships in a racialized society: A thematic analysis. *The American Journal of Family Therapy*, 52(2), 101–119.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01926187.2024.2331125>
- Rico, B. (2024). *Growth in interracial and inter-ethnic married-couple households*. Census.gov.
<https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2018/07/interracial-marriages.html>
- Seshadri, G., & Knudson-Martin, C. (2013). How couples manage interracial and intercultural differences: Implications for clinical practice. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 39(1), 43–58. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1752-0606.2011.00262.x>
- Schelle, J. (2025). Interracial and inter-ethnic marriage in America: Changing attitudes and persistent challenges. *Journal of Family Issues*, 46(3), 487–512.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X23121234>
- Steinbugler, A. C. (2014). Loving across racial divides: Black/White couples in the U.S. *Contexts*, 13(2), 32–37. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1536504214533497>
- Vasquez, V., Otero, I., & Goodlow, J. (2019). Relationship stigma and Black–White interracial marital satisfaction: The mediating role of religious/spiritual well-being. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 22(3), 305–318. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2019.1620189>